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Minority educators discuss a public story that challenges social inclusion



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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on understanding professional development as an interactive social, cultural, and political process. Toward that end, we present an analysis of an innovative professional development activity with educators from a minority group in a social inclusion reform program who reflected on a news story of an event challenging the reform. Based on socio-cultural discourse theory, we posited that participants' interactions around the public story would reveal unique insights about implementations of the policy, and we posed questions about what those insights would be. Participants—174 Roma Pedagogical Assistants (PAs)—read, discussed, and wrote endings to the public story in a workshop during their professional training. Analyses of the public story discussions and original story endings by 24 groups of PAs emphasized the need for public authorities to enforce social inclusion policy in collaboration with a wide range of relevant stakeholders, including those in Roma communities. Participants reached this consensus through effortful argumentation about threats to integration indicated in the public story and their own deliberations about the need for justice for the entire community. This study offers evidence that policy subjects offer unique insights by interacting directly with one another around a relevant critical incident. We discuss implications of the study for research and practice of educational reform as an interactive process.

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses the importance of providing space and time for subjects of reform policies to address challenges and make suggestions for improvement. Toward that end, we present the design and analysis of a professional development process indicating the mediating role of public stories in social change. This analysis is based on a case study in the Roma Pedagogical Assistant (PA) Program in Serbia, consistent with the Decade of Roma Inclusion policy (2005–2015). Professionals in the innovative role of PA discussed and created endings to a news story expressing ambivalent motivations by majority group parents who prevented pre-school entry of an incoming class of 54 children, including 44 Roma children.

The theoretical framework guiding the practice-based inquiry is that individual and societal development occurs via the use and transformation of cultural norms embodied in discourse, a quintessential symbol system (Vygotsky, 1978). Recently, perhaps because of increasing inequality and marginalization of minority groups worldwide, the development of institutions themselves is a focus, as institutions rapidly change and diversify to circumstances (Daniels, 2010; Engstrom, 2009; Fear & Azambuja, 2014). Given a focus on interactions among individuals, groups, and broader society, institutional norms and practices should be open to examination. As stated in one research article, “In keeping with this the generation of alternatives to existing routine practices,

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the transformation of existing institutions, and the building of new institutions, are generally considered phenomena that are worthy of study as special forms of action” (Fear & Azambuja, 2014, p. 286). Consistent with that idea, we explain how such a process of individual and institutional change occurs via collectively considered symbolic and physical artifacts embodying values and goals. The artifact at the center of present inquiry is a news story about a conflict threatening an integration policy.

If “institutions are repeated patterns of behavior in relation to an object” (Fear & Azambuja, 2014, p. 292), then public policies are mediators of interactions relevant to social change goals. That policy-making tends to occur in a “top-down way” from elites, such as government officials and representatives of funding organizations, to policy subjects deemed worthy of or requiring politically mediated interventions must be questioned (Hanson, Darbellay and Poretti, 2010). Some policy-makers initially include members of the communities they intend to support; nevertheless, power relations inherent in policy implementations require ongoing participation and authority policy subjects. Examinations of institutional goals and practices have become increasingly integrated into developmental studies (Daiute, 2014; Daiute, Kovacs-Cerovic, Todorova, Jokic and Ataman, 2013; Engeström et al., 1999), but theory and research on the development of institutional policies and practices as interdependent with the development of persons and cultures requires further articulation and examination. A powerful mechanism of such dynamic social change is narrative and its use in public and private discourse (Fairclough, 2010; Wetherell & Potter, 1993). Narrative practices are promising yet require further research as a means of social change.

1.1. *The mediating role of narrative*

Narrating is an activity of oral, written, and visual communication. These discursive activities not only express symbolic thinking but also form it, embody it, and change it (Parker, 2015). Narrative functions in perception, sense-making, and development (Bruner, 1987; Nelson, 1998). Individuals and groups use narrating to figure out what is going on around them, how they fit, and, sometimes, how to change circumstances (Daiute & Nelson, 1997). Research with narrating builds on practices of daily life, where people use storytelling to *do* things—to connect with other people, to deal with social structures defining their lives, to make sense of what is going on around them, to craft a way of fitting in with various contexts, and sometimes to change them (Daiute, 2014). In this process, narrating integrates perspectives of diverse individuals and groups with varied influence, experience, knowledge, and goals.

Like language more broadly, narrating is a purposeful activity directed to other people, one’s self, the physical environment, and symbolic culture (Vygotsky, 1978). Narrators use myriad elements, including characters, settings, plot structures resolutions, and morals as building blocks for sharing experience, feelings, and intentions (Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997). Values and norms that people develop in everyday life guide what they mention or do not dare mention in each narrative appropriate to the purpose, audience, and situation. This communicative nature of narrating—*how* people express themselves—is central to *what* people are saying in informal and formal interactions. Beyond developing basic narrative abilities in one’s native cultural context, children, adolescents, and adults continue to develop narrative structures and practices as they participate in diverse cultures and institutions, as is increasingly required in this highly mobile and media connected world (Daiute, 2014).

Just as storytelling socializes young people via cultural values shared during routine events that parents, teachers, and employers repeat and reinforce, children, adolescents, and adults socialize those around them, by infusing personal details and desires into scripts (routine ways of explaining routine events) and transforming them into nuanced stories (Daiute & Nelson, 1997). Different social scripts may co-occur, may be integrated, like plots and subplots, and may clash, resulting in expressions that seem incoherent. It is through such processes, especially those involving conflict and argumentation that learning, development, and social change occur (Muller Mizra & Perret-Clermont, 2014; Zittoun, 2014). Prior research shows that individuals sometimes conform their personal stories to preferred narratives in their societies but also use narrating to express counter-conforming experiences and ideas, when they have the opportunity (Daiute, 2010; 2014; Daiute, Stern & Lelutiu-Weinberger, 2003). Narrating, thus, can function as a tool to mediate individual and societal interactions. More inquiry is required to demonstrate how that occurs.

1.2. *Public stories as mediators of social change*

A public story is a narrative that circulates explicitly and implicitly among individuals and society in the practices of everyday life. Public stories circulate in society via diverse communications—which may be more interactive like social media, activities in public institutions like schools, workplaces, health services, and people’s private conversations, or apparently less interactive like newspaper or other print discourses (Daiute, 2014). Given the cultural use of narratives for identifying and making sense of conflicts, public stories often revolve around diverse beliefs, values, behaviors, claims to resources and rights. A common public story is about an event involving the aggressive action of different sides in a conflict and the role of police in such conflicts, especially when they become violent. Individuals and groups in different positions in society affiliate with different versions of such public stories, for example, those who favor aggressive legal or governmental action in urban neighborhoods versus those who observe that aggressive police actions overwhelmingly target black male youth. In this way, public stories become cultural tools that condense experience and knowledge to organize perception, interpretation, and action. In their familiarity and efficiency, public stories are often canonical and unquestioned scripts (Foucault, 2001; Nelson, 1998). As cultural tools that function for sense making and action, however, public stories embody diverse values circulating in conversations about salient events. When the transmission of public stories proceeds without question or critique, the explanations of reality serving those with influence and power are sustained (Amsterdam & Bruner, 2000). For that reason, opening public stories to argumentation by those with something at

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